

2018

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Darby, Nell (2018). 'The Hampstead Murder: Subversion in Press Portrayals of a Murderess', SOLON Law, Crime and History, 8(1), p. 5-20.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/14284>

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SOLON Law, Crime and History  
University of Plymouth

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## THE HAMPSTEAD MURDER: SUBVERSION IN PRESS PORTRAYALS OF A MURDERESS

*Nell Darby*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The murders of Phoebe Hogg and her toddler daughter by Mary Eleanor Piercey, the lover of Phoebe's husband, in London in 1892 subverted the usual Victorian press conventions surrounding a female killer. Whereas such women were commonly depicted as monsters, representing 'the other' and portrayed as plain, even masculine, creatures, Mary Eleanor was presented in romanticised terms, her good looks contrasted with the more masculine looks of her female victim. This article looks at how, and why, the coverage of this murderess differed, asks whether this case should make us re-evaluate how cases involving female killers were covered by the newspapers, and assesses whether press coverage of this particular case reflected a change in the nature of British journalism from a desire to educate readers, to an increasing desire to entertain them.

**Keywords:** Gender, Victorian crime, popular culture, Hampstead murder, Mary Piercey, Phoebe Hogg

### Introduction

In the autumn of 1890, 32-year-old Phoebe Hogg was found murdered on a Hampstead building site, her throat cut. Two days later, her 18-month-old daughter was also found murdered, also outside, although in a different location – furze bushes just off the Finchley Road. A suspect was quickly identified; 24-year-old factory worker Mary Piercey was charged with the double murder, convicted, and hanged two days before Christmas.<sup>2</sup> The case resulted in substantial coverage in local and national newspapers, from *The Times* to the *Illustrated Police News*, with the latter including several graphic front-page illustrations of the murders. Press coverage of the murders inevitably presented a mediated representation of this female murderess, but coverage also subverted the usual narrative of the female 'monster'.<sup>3</sup>

Although Mary Piercey subverted traditional stereotypes of Victorian femininity, being a young woman who killed other females, including a baby, in a particularly violent way, within the domestic sphere of her kitchen, she was presented as a romantic heroine. This article will suggest that Mary's literacy, her status as an avid writer of love letters and reader of

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<sup>2</sup> Both Victorian newspaper reports, and subsequent academic mention of the murderess give her name variously as Piercey, Pearcey, Piercy and Percy, in addition to her birth name of Wheeler. Here, for the sake of consistency, her name is given as Piercey throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Jewkes, *Media and Crime*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: Sage, 2015), p. 129, p. 135.

romantic novelettes, provided an expanding and increasingly competitive press, fighting for the same readership, with the means of constructing an 'easy' narrative that would appeal particularly to female readers. Mary confounded stereotypes both because of the relative rarity of her crime – a woman killing her lover's wife and child – and because she was young, pretty and educated, rather than being a woman whom the press could easily portray as a monster, or the 'other'.<sup>4</sup> The graphic and textual representations of her crime that appeared in the press showed both how a romance was made out of a horrific crime, and how important public appeal was in the way the crime was depicted. The emphasis on crowds and spectators in pictorial illustrations of the murders that appeared in the likes of the *Illustrated Police News* made clear that coverage was designed to appeal to the masses, making them voyeurs, and the crime a form of public entertainment.

## 1 The Murderess

Mary Eleanor Wheeler was born in 1867. In 1885, when she was around 18-years-old, she met John Charles Piercey, and embarked on a relationship with him. She called herself Mary Eleanor Piercey from this point, seeing her relationship as akin to marriage, but John less gallantly referred to her as his mistress. They continued in a sexual relationship for three years, before John left her. By 1890, Mary Piercey was living in rooms at 2 Priory Street in Kentish Town, ostensibly on her own, although there are suggestions that the rooms had been paid for by a subsequent lover.<sup>5</sup>

Mary's primary victim was Phoebe Hogg, a former servant, seven years' Mary's senior. She had married grocer Frank Samuel Hogg on 22 November 1888, and the following April, their daughter Phoebe Hanslope Hogg was born. As can be easily worked out from these dates, Frank and Phoebe had been in a sexual relationship prior to their marriage, and although

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<sup>4</sup> Some recent scholarship has challenged the idea of violence subverting ideological ideas of femininity and domesticity, but in different contexts. Virginia B Morris has discussed the 'mounting tensions over the inequitable status of the sexes' and how this is expressed through the creation of sympathetically-drawn criminal women in fiction (Virginia B Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women who kill in Victorian fiction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), pp. 1-2) – although she later acknowledges that 'women guilty of violent crimes are at odds with the culturally nurtured image of acceptable womanly behaviour' (pp. 8-9). Andrew Mangham has noted the Victorian association between 'excessive female passion and the potential for violence' (Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007), p. 130). However, the cases he cites – such as the likes of Madeleine Smith, Florence Bravo and Florence Maybrick – all involve a woman alleged to have killed either a male lover or a husband, unlike Mary Piercey's case. However, Andrew Smith's discussion of the behaviour of a fictional female, Esther in *Bleak House*, notes that she 'gains authority by acting upon the world in a way which suggests the importance of her agency in ordering, and so controlling, domestic spaces', which is an intriguing possibility in terms of Mary Piercey's offence (Andrew Smith, *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 125).

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 4 December 1890, p. 4.

Frank later stated that they had been engaged for some two or three years prior to the wedding, it appears to have been Phoebe's pregnancy that precipitated the eventual marriage.<sup>6</sup> The Hoggs lived with Frank's mother and sister in rooms at 141 Prince of Wales Road, only round the corner from Mary Piercey, and the two women became friends. Phoebe spent her days either walking her baby round the local area in her bassinette, visiting Mary, or heading to her elderly father's home at Ricksmansworth to see him. Husband Frank, meanwhile, gave up his career as a grocer to become a furniture remover, employed by his own brother. This is the background to the horror story so eagerly covered by the newspapers in 1890, and one that revealed what was, to local society, the real scandal - that Mary Piercey had been having an affair with Frank Hogg.

On the morning of Friday, 24 October 1890, Frank Hogg had left home, as usual, early, to help his brother in his furniture removing business. When he returned home in the evening, his mother and sister told him that Phoebe had gone out, having told her in-laws that she would 'not be long away'. Although she had not returned, the Hoggs said later that they had not been worried, as they assumed she had gone to visit her father in Hertfordshire, as he was unwell, and that she must have decided to stay the night. Even so, Frank sat up until two the next morning waiting for her return, although he didn't call the police. The following day, Saturday, he left the house at 6am, returning nearly three hours later for his breakfast. He saw his landlady, but didn't mention that his wife was still absent. However, at 8pm the previous night, Phoebe's body had been found on a building site in Crossland Road, Hampstead, her throat cut, and a cardigan jacket thrown over her head. Already, the gossip mill was in overdrive, and the landlady had heard about this shocking murder, although the victim's identity hadn't yet been established. The Hoggs were told by their landlady of the discovery, and immediately linked the news to missing Phoebe. Mary Piercey then called at the house, and on reference being made to the murder, her first reaction was to say she would go and 'purchase a newspaper containing the details'.<sup>7</sup>

## **2 Encouraging a Moral Panic**

The first impulse on the part of police, public, and press, was to attribute the crime to Jack the Ripper. This was not wholly unexpected; the Whitechapel murders had occurred just two years earlier, and the murderer(s) had not been identified, let alone brought to justice. Therefore, to many people in London, there was still a killer on the loose who targeted women. There had been recent speculation, the papers said, that the Whitechapel murderer was soon 'expected to commence a fresh series of crimes' – in other words, the public were

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<sup>6</sup> *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 7 December 1890, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Hull Daily Mail*, 27 October 1890, p. 3.

scaring themselves with stories and rumours that after allegedly committing so many murders within a short space of time, he could not refrain from embarking on a fresh series of crimes. Such rumours were evidence of a panic in the metropolis that assumed any murder of a female to be the actions of the Ripper. The press had a valuable use here in scotching the rumours (although one could argue that by repeating them, they in fact spread them to a wider audience than before – on the Saturday, the *Illustrated Police News* stated that ‘at first the mysterious Jack the Ripper was suspected’). Coverage reiterated the prior sensational reporting found in stories relating to the Whitechapel murders two years earlier, despite the *Illustrated Police News* admitting that although the murder of Mrs Hogg was ‘peculiar’ and ‘perplexing’, the facts were ‘wholly inconsistent’ with the Whitechapel murderer’s modus operandi.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Mr McDonald, the man who found Phoebe’s body, had first assumed she was merely a drunkard collapsed near the road, and left her body there for a while before having second thoughts and calling the police, says much about how she was subsequently depicted. It was more likely that a drunk would be lying on the floor than a murdered woman; but implicit is the suggestion that there was little difference between a drunk and a murder victim – neither was seen as a particularly respectable object to have in the locality, and what respectable woman would be out on a Friday night on her own – perhaps she had been responsible for her own death? The emphasis early editions of the papers gave to this apparent drunkenness, and the similarly untrue assumption that Phoebe must be an ‘unfortunate’, implicitly suggested some blame on the part of this young wife and mother for her own demise – she must be little different to the ‘unfortunates’ of the East End who had been killed by the Whitechapel murderer. What would become the dominant press narrative – critical of the victim, and more favourable towards Mary Eleanor Piercey – can already be seen to be forming in these initial reports of the murder.

On Phoebe Hogg’s body being discovered, the police made attempts to identify her – a job made easier by the presence of initials on her clothing.<sup>9</sup> Mary, together with Frank Hogg’s sister, were asked to identify Mrs Hogg’s body, and Mary was described by the *Illustrated*

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<sup>8</sup> Neil Pemberton, “Bloodhounds as Detectives”: Dogs, Slum Stench and Late-Victorian Murder Investigation’, *Cultural and Social History*, 10: 1 (2013), p. 69; *Illustrated Police News*, 1 November 1890, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 25 October 1890, p. 6: the day after Phoebe’s murder, noted that she had been ‘dressed in a short, black jacket, with astrakhan collar and cuffs, and black hat and dress’.

*Police News* as having been 'much moved, and fainting at the sight'.<sup>10</sup> The following day, Phoebe's 18-month-old daughter was also found dead, in furze bushes on a piece of wasteland off the Finchley Road, her clothes saturated from overnight rain. Half an hour after her body was discovered, her abandoned bassinette, covered in blood, was found abandoned at Hamilton Terrace in St John's Wood. A screw-nut found near the mother's body was identified as coming from this bassinette. It was remarked that the areas where mother, child, and pram had been found were 'a long way apart, and whoever wheeled the perambulator first up to Finchley, and then back to Hamilton Terrace must have had a weary round of it.'<sup>11</sup> The discovery of the pram put paid to the rumours of a link to the Whitechapel murder, in that clearly not just a woman had been targeted, but it did not, as might have been expected, create a new image of Phoebe as an innocent, as a mother of a young child, both of whom had been cruelly robbed of life.

Mary's identification as a suspect in Phoebe's murder came as the result of a few simple errors that led the police and press to focus on her private life and her status as a young, unmarried female who had been let down by men. Firstly, she had been seen wheeling the baby's bassinette on Friday afternoon, struggling with it as there appeared to be something heavy in it. Secondly, the cardigan jacket found placed over Phoebe Hogg's head was identified by Mary's ex-lover, Charles Piercey, as being one of his that he had left at Mary's lodgings. Phoebe's sister, Martha, then told the police that Mary had invited Phoebe to visit her on Friday afternoon, asking her to 'bring the child'. Phoebe's niece, Elizabeth, added that Phoebe had correctly suspected her husband of having an affair with Mary, and that the Hoggs had frequently quarrelled as a result of these suspicions. The police searched Mary's rooms, and found the kitchen walls and ceiling splattered with blood. There were also a poker and two carving knives, similarly smeared with blood, and evidence that Mary had unsuccessfully tried to clean the stains up.

### **3 A Novelette-Reading Murderess**

Other items found splattered with blood in her rooms were Mary's novelettes. She was an avid reader of them, a fan of romantic fiction. This was something focused on by the press, who detailed with enjoyment the blood-coated publications found in her house after the murder. Could this have been a reason why Mary was portrayed as a romantic heroine as much as a murderer? The focus of the press on a suspected murderess with a strong

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<sup>10</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 1 November 1890, p.2. This was a disputed narrative, however. *The Times* was among the newspapers that had a different story, stating that 'the sister-in-law [sic] identified the body, but Mrs Percy [sic] failed to do so' – see *The Times*, 27 October 1890, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 1 November 1890, p. 2.

interest in reading or writing was not new. Back in 1857, the trial of Madeleine Smith, accused of poisoning her lover, heard how she had sent hundreds of letters to him, many under the name of 'Mimi', using flowery, romanticised language. The perception of Madeleine as a romantic, educated woman from a well-to-do Glasgow family, with her victim portrayed as a 'vain', moody, immigrant can be seen to have had much to do with the eventual jury decision of 'not proven' that allowed Madeleine freedom.<sup>12</sup>

But Mary, from a lower class than her Scottish equivalent, a different place and a different period within the Victorian age, committed the murder in 1890. This was a peak decade in terms of the female-oriented romance novelette, or, as it has been somewhat rudely described, a 'crumpled bit of pink-covered romance'.<sup>13</sup> From 1889 to 1899, the *Dorothy Novelette* and its supplements, for example, provided women with a regular penny periodical aimed at them, which developed over time from a complete story being offered in each issue to becoming more of a multi-faceted women's magazine, as Kate Macdonald and Marysa Demoor have pointed out.<sup>14</sup> Macdonald has, separately, described the *Dorothy* as an antifeminist, formulaic magazine, focused on providing romantic love stories and disseminating 'fractured messages' to its female readers.<sup>15</sup> During the era when the concept of the New Woman was gaining traction, such romantic periodicals ignored the modern woman and catered for more old-fashioned ideals of boy meets girl, boy and girl marry and live happily for ever after. As Macdonald notes, although the focus of historians has been on the New Woman and feminism in the fin de siècle, in reality, there was a sizeable proportion of the print market, and indeed, the weekly periodical market, that remained obstinately conservative and moralistic – but not necessarily realistic.<sup>16</sup>

In the nineteenth century, it was thought that fiction could both be didactic, and a bad influence. As Kate Flint has explored, commentators were 'particularly anxious about the effects of reading fiction on women', causing them to become 'dissatisfied with the limitations of their lives'. In particular, the reading of 'trashy' fiction was particularly risky in terms of leaving women to dream of lives that were above their status – a dangerous form of

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas MacGowan, *Murder in Victorian Scotland: The Trial of Madeleine Smith* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), p. 25, p. 103, p. 108, p. 127, p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Agnes Repplier, 'English Railway Fiction', *Points of View* (Houghton, Boston, 1892), pp. 209-10, cited in Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure and the London Shopgirl, 1880-1920* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Macdonald and Marysa Demoor, 'Saving, Spending and Serving: Expressions of the use of time in the *Dorothy Novelette* and its supplements (1889-99)', *Media History*, 16: 2 (2010), pp. 171-82.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Macdonald, 'Ignoring the New Woman: Ten years of a Victorian weekly fiction magazine', in Tamara S Wagner (ed.), *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2009), p. 297.

<sup>16</sup> Macdonald, 'Ignoring the New Woman', p. 298.

escapism.<sup>17</sup> Lise Sanders, similarly, has noted that girls and women were the target market for romance fiction – firstly the romance novel, and later, the novelette and magazine – and that such fiction became ‘the object of censure for its potential to endanger the moral state and physical condition of young female readers’.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the emphasis on Mary Piercey’s reading habits served not only to create a persona that the press could use to entertain its readers – it also showed the press as moral arbiters, hinting that the reading of romance novelettes had given her ideas above her station. According to this narrative, reading love stories had led Mary to believe that a married father was her soulmate, and that by killing his family, she could gain a happy ending with her lover.

The lives of these individuals, from the lower classes of north London (Hampstead not being the environment of the super-rich as it is now), also channelled concerns about the morals and corruption of the labouring class, and about increasing literacy levels.<sup>19</sup> Earlier in the nineteenth century, one critic of sentimental fiction had argued that it had been to blame for ‘females of the lower orders’ being seduced or disappointed in life, and by the 1890s, fiction aimed at the lower classes, such as penny dreadfuls, encouraged ‘insubordinate activity’ among the young, and crime amongst both the young and older members of society. Such descriptions reflected what Lise Sanders has termed ‘a class-based anxiety’ that saw literacy and the reading of novels, penny dreadfuls and romantic novelettes as threatening to destroy the ‘social distinctions of rank and class’.<sup>20</sup> Kate Summerscale has reiterated this, in relation to the impact of penny dreadfuls on working-class youths, saying that ‘penny fiction was Britain’s first taste of mass-produced popular culture for the young, and was often held responsible for the decay of literature and morality.’<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Mary Piercey reflected wider concerns about the influence of literature on the working-classes, and, in particular, working-class women. Yet the press, as we can see, also followed the tropes of the romantic novelettes and cheap fiction in how it portrayed Mary, as this article will now go on to explain.

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<sup>17</sup> Kate Flint, ‘Victorian readers’, *Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians*, British Library ([www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/victorian-readers](http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/victorian-readers)) [Accessed 10 April 2017].

<sup>18</sup> Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies*, p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> TFT Baker, Diane K Bolton and Patricia EC Croot, ‘Hampstead: Settlement and Growth’, in CR Elrington (ed.), *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 9, Hampstead, Paddington* (London: VCH, 1989), pp. 8-15; in the nineteenth century, the Hampstead area was home to a sizeable immigrant and refugee population, including those from Ireland, Germany, France, the US and Bohemia; by the end of the century, an increasing number of local houses were being sub-divided into flats, bedsits and lodging houses to accommodate this growing and diverse population.

<sup>20</sup> Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880-1920* (Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 2006), p. 134.

<sup>21</sup> Kate Summerscale, *The Wicked Boy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 109.



#### 4 On Public Display

The murders were reported in graphic detail, aimed at drawing the reader in as though they were reading a penny dreadful. Early coverage of the murder of Phoebe Hogg, prior to the discovery of her daughter's body, was published rapidly, with no illustrations, but the text was equally rich in imagery and detail. The *Illustrated Police News* stressed the 'brutal butchery' inflicted on Phoebe Hogg, and built a picture of the night her body was discovered. She was found on a 'dark and lonely thoroughfare, only partially built upon', with no public lamps. On being fully examined at Hampstead Police Station, Phoebe's body was found to have a fractured skull from a 'powerful blow with...probably a pickaxe', and her throat had been cut 'in such a determined manner that her head was nearly severed from her body, both the windpipe and the spinal column having been divided.' It was also hypothesised that Phoebe had first been stunned with a blow from a brick, before being killed. It was also stated that Phoebe's body had been photographed 'in the presence of several medical men', but, unlike with the Whitechapel murders, the photographs of the victim have never become public.<sup>22</sup> However, the press reporting of the photographing of Phoebe's body underscored the visual nature of the crime – from the moment her body was discovered, Phoebe was there to be gawped at by men (and women), drawn and photographed, her life laid out for public entertainment. Even her identification via the initials on clothing had a salacious element, with *The Times* noting that 'one of the deceased's undergarments was marked PH'.<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, descriptions of Mary concentrated on her respectability. She was falsely claimed to be married, but living apart from her husband. On her arrest – initially for the murder of Phoebe Hogg, and on suspicion of murdering the 'missing female child of the deceased woman' – her hands were certainly described as being cut and scratched, and her clothing stained, but her actions were already being explained away – 'It is thought that jealousy may have furnished some motive for the crime.'<sup>24</sup> Yet the descriptions of her blood-spattered kitchen and belongings might have been expected to be reported as evidence of her evil, in that she had killed within the heart of Victorian female domesticity. She had subverted conventions and tropes of female behaviour not only in killing here, but in her failed, ineffectual efforts at cleaning afterwards; the blood stains remained, sullyng the cleanliness of her environment. Instead, these facts were mentioned in a cursory way, almost as incidental asides. One brief comment in the *Illustrated Police News* that if Mary was guilty of murder, 'she has by her callous and calm behaviour achieved a place in the

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<sup>22</sup> *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 26 October 1890, pp. 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, 27 October 1890, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 1 November 1890, p. 2.

front rank of murderesses' followed the tropes of reporting on female killers, but was an anomaly compared to other and later reports.<sup>25</sup> There was also little attention paid to the fact that Mary had made such effort to get rid of the bodies in waste areas of north London. She had subverted again the image of the domestic Victorian woman by using a baby's pram not to take a child for a walk, but to dispose of two bodies. She had left the body of Phoebe Hogg to be discovered as a 'drunk' or 'unfortunate'; she had left the baby's body out in the rain. Both suggest a hard-hearted individual. However, the romantic novelettes and the love letters Mary had, together with the cardigan left by her former lover, were seen as evidence of her romantic and innocent nature. In choosing what elements of the story to focus on, the press was able to depict her in a way that suited the story they wanted to tell, and that they thought their readers would want to read. That this story was not the whole one, and not an objective one, was not their concern in the chase for readers.<sup>26</sup>

There was substantial press focus on Mary's novelettes and love letters. At her trial, letters between Mary and Frank Hogg were read out loud, and eagerly covered by the press:

[he] prisoner addressed 'Frank' in most endearing terms, and repeated reference was made to Hogg's supposed intention to commit suicide. The prisoner pleaded with him not to do so.'

*Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* went further, reporting the contents of at least five letters in its pages. These all conformed to romantic stereotypes, with Mary making repeated assertions of everlasting love to Frank, and stating that she was suffering from 'heartache' due to not seeing him. She included poems (written by others, not herself), in her letters; and recorded, a month prior to his wedding to Phoebe, that she would 'see you married 50 times over, yes, I could bear that far better than parting with you for ever'.<sup>27</sup> These letters were not salacious, but they were clearly intimate, and helped present Mary as a romantic heroine, a literate woman who wrote regularly to her lover to plead for his affection. Mary's response to the reading of these private letters was also recorded: 'prisoner sat in the dock with downcast eyes, her lips nervously twitching'. When her former lover, John Charles Piercey, gave evidence, and stated that Mary had been his mistress, she 'appeared agitated and removed

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<sup>25</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 1 November 1890, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *The Times*, aimed at a more educated class, was more critical of Mary than the *Illustrated Police News* and the provincial papers, implying that the only reason Mary was thought to be married is because this is how she 'described herself', and that she had been 'peculiarly reticent' when originally questioned by the police. This reflects Martin Wiener's view that 'elite' papers such as *The Times* tended to take a harsher tone than the more popular press. See Martin J Wiener, 'Convicted Murderers and the Victorian Press: Condemnation vs Sympathy', *Crimes and Misdemeanours* 1: 2 (2007), p.111, p.124. However, although *The Times* may have had a different understanding of the function of the newspaper, trying to inform its readers still, as opposed to entertaining them, it still engaged in the same graphic detail in terms of the murder of Phoebe Hogg - *The Times*, 27 October 1890, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 7 December 1890, p. 4.

a heavy ulster she had been wearing'.<sup>28</sup> She was, then, presented as both fashionable and emotional – this was no hard-hearted, hard-faced, soberly dressed figure for the press and public to demonise, but instead, a young, stylish, affectionate woman who read romantic stories, wrote love letters, and acted in court as the heroine of a romance would.

Steve Chibnall, in his exploration of crime reporting in the British press, has noted that newspapers 'construct representations and accounts of reality which are shaped' by them, and that the 'events which capture the interest of the media only become visible through their eyes'.<sup>29</sup> Here, the press was clearly attempting to create an image of Mary as a romantic figure, who had been abandoned by her former lover, and let down by her subsequent one. The placing of Frank's name in inverted commas was unnecessary, given that his birth was registered as Frank rather than, say, Francis, but to place it in those inverted commas suggested an intimacy between him and Mary, telling readers that she referred to him in informal terms and thus that there was a loving relationship between the two.<sup>30</sup> This was further emphasised by the reporting of Frank's exchange of a 'long earnest look' with Mary when he was called to give evidence, and Mary's 'extreme' agitation at his appearance, which included 'opening and closing her lips in a nervous excited manner'. Hogg's admittance that he had had an 'immoral' relationship with Mary gave rise to depictions of him as somewhat shifty and untrustworthy; he was even reported as answering questions in court 'in his customary weak manner'.<sup>31</sup> It was clear that if the press sought a criminal in this case, it was Frank who they wanted to depict in this way, rather than Mary. Her depiction throughout was of a loving, romantic, woman, and this was backed-up by Frank Hogg who, in an attempt to make himself appear in a better light, insisted, rather implausibly, that although he had met Phoebe and Mary at around the same time, and developed relationships with both, it was only Phoebe whom he had been in a sexual relationship with prior to marrying.<sup>32</sup> By admitting to sex outside of marriage with the murder victim, and denying the same had happened with Mary, he was, unconsciously perhaps, colluding in this picture of Mary as the innocent - even though it was Mary's romantic

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<sup>28</sup> *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 3 December 1890, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Steve Chibnall (ed.), Introduction to *Law-and-Order News: An Analysis of Crime Reporting in the British Press* (London: Routledge, 1977), p. ix.

<sup>30</sup> Birth registrations for the Pancras district, December quarter of 1859, vol. 1b, p. 113 (via [www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk)).

<sup>31</sup> *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 7 December 1890, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 7 December 1890, p.4. Frank's testimony, as reported here, was somewhat shifty and shifting. He stated that he and Phoebe had been engaged for two years, until the prosecuting counsel suggested that this was the same time that he had known Mary. Frank then changed his mind, and said he and Phoebe had been engaged for three years. He had earlier stated that he had known Mary for four years.

novelettes had ended up being 'matted together with blood' after she cut the throat of her lover's wife.<sup>33</sup>

## 5 A Graphic Murder

As can be seen in these descriptions, the press created a novelette itself out of coverage of the murder. It also used images to bring the case to life for its readers, and these images reinforced the black and white textual descriptions of Mary as the romantic heroine and Phoebe as the downtrodden wife. On 8 November 1890, *The Illustrated Police News* devoted its front page to the Hampstead Murder. Of the multiple images on its page, there were three large drawings of the murder victim Phoebe Hogg: one purporting to show her alive, and copied from a photograph; the other two of her after death (the second pictured cuddled up to her dead baby in a coffin). None of the illustrations of Phoebe were flattering; she is shown with frizzed hair, a lined face and prominent, dimpled chin; her eyes are hooded, her eyebrows and jowls heavy. This echoed the written descriptions of her as being 'a much bigger, stronger, more powerful woman than Mrs Piercey'.<sup>34</sup>

These images were contrasted with those of Mary Piercey, who was elegant in a fashionable hat, finely drawn features and a sad expression. Later on, Mary was described as being 'considerably distressed' at having to appear in court in workhouse garb, suggesting a fashion-conscious woman – and the press noticeably failed to judge her for this vanity.<sup>35</sup> Mary's eyebrows were shown as fine and nicely shaped; Phoebe's were thick, unruly. Mary had a smooth, unlined complexion; Phoebe's was worn, pulled down. These artistic representations of the two women have led to assumptions being made even by more recent commentators; for example, Judith Knelman, in her analysis of coverage of murderesses in the English press, has described Mary's 'intelligence' and that she was an 'attractive and stylish young woman', basing her assumptions not on photographic evidence but from how the press at the time described and drew her.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This was, again, how most papers described Mary; but *The Times* maintained its more critical stance, alleging that Mary was also known as Mrs Crichton, and that she had a husband living at Gravesend in Kent. She had apparently told her lover, Charles Piercey, that she had been married at 16 to Mr Crichton. However, the 'marriage' had failed within three years, as by the age of 19, she had started her relationship with Piercey (*The Times*, 28 October 1890, p.7). Richard Clark has recorded an 'admirer' named Charles Creighton who had rented rooms for Mary at 2 Priory Street, Kentish Town, back in 1888 - this may be the same man (Richard Clark, 'Mary Eleanor Wheeler (Pearcey). Can murder run in a family?', *Capital Punishment UK*, [www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/wheeler.html](http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/wheeler.html), n.d., accessed 16 June 2017).

<sup>34</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 1 November 1890, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Salisbury Times*, 1 November 1890, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Knelman, *The Murderess and the English Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 111-12.

The unflattering comparisons between Phoebe and Mary, as shown in these images, reflected the written descriptions of them. From the beginning, Phoebe was depicted in a negative way, one newspaper noting that on Phoebe's body first being discovered, it had been 'surmised' by police that she was 'an unfortunate', in other words, a seduced woman or prostitute. Although this description was later corrected to 'a respectable woman', the wife of a furniture remover, mud sticks - and that initial description of the murder victim may have been what stayed with newspaper editors and readers alike.<sup>37</sup> Of course, this was all published in a belief that this is what readers wanted. As Asa Briggs and Peter Burke have pointed out, it was in the 1880s and 1890s that the press really started to move away from the business of 'informing' the public, towards simply selling the public the stories they wanted. Entertainment was as important, if not more so, than providing information.<sup>38</sup> Mass literacy meant that more people, from a wider range of backgrounds, were able to pick up a paper, and a wider range of publications on offer meant that they were in competition to provide the most salacious stories to win over readers. As Drew Gray has commented, newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century 'increasingly used crime as a vehicle for securing and retaining a growing readership' using sensationalist reporting to reach the increasingly literate public.<sup>39</sup> This had been noted by Wilkie Collins in 1858, when he stated that there was 'an unknown public, a public to be counted by millions, the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel journals'.<sup>40</sup> The year before the murders, in 1889, a row had erupted over the emergence of 'seven-day journalism', when Sunday editions of the newspapers began to be published.<sup>41</sup> There were now an increasing number of newspapers fighting to attract the same pool of readers.<sup>42</sup> Their desire to appeal to the 'universal public', to the masses, was also evident in the depiction of crowds in illustrations of the murder and its aftermath.

The images published in the *Illustrated Police News* show a variety of settings, clearly putting 'place' at the centre of this offence. One image showed Mary pushing the bassinette containing body parts past a house, whilst a neighbour walked by, staring; crowds of

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<sup>37</sup> *Salisbury Times*, 1 November 1890, p.5.

<sup>38</sup> Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (London: Polity, 2009), p. 182

<sup>39</sup> Drew Gray, 'Gang Crime and the Media in Late Nineteenth-Century London: The Regent's Park Murder of 1888', *Cultural and Social History*, 10:4 (2013), p. 565.

<sup>40</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words*, 21 August 1858, as cited in Lorna Huett, 'Household Words, All The Year Round and the Mass Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38:1 (2005), p. 61.

<sup>41</sup> David Scott Kamper, 'Popular Sunday newspapers, respectability and working-class culture in late Victorian Britain', in Mike Huggins and J.A. Mangan (eds.), *Disreputable Pleasures: Less Virtuous Victorians At Play* (Frank Cass, Abingdon, 2004), p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> Martin J Wiener, 'Convicted Murderers and the Victorian Press: Condemnation vs Sympathy', *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, 1:2 (2007), p. 110.

mourners were shown at the Hoggs' funeral; people and police watched as Mary was taken to the police station and then to prison; gawpers were depicted outside the houses of Mary and Phoebe respectively, and crowds of people were even shown outside the undertakers, after the two bodies were taken there to await the funeral. The images emphasised the presence of onlookers, the sensation of being watched. Mary was watched as she gets rid of Phoebe's body, the onlooker too slow to prevent the murder. The police watched Mary's house - but again too late, only watching after murders had actually been committed there. The trial of Mary Piercey was attended by 'crowds' of men and women, who were frustrated by Mary's bent head when the judge did his summing up, as she failed to give them a final opportunity to see her as the heroine of the story. The readers were invited to look at the images of Phoebe and her daughter, dead in their joint coffin. They were part of the spectating strangers, their prurient interest in Mary's love life, and its horrific climax, reflected in the images of crowds in public places.

The murder weapons were illustrated and listed, including the fatal poker and the blood-stained knife, together with the cardigan jacket that Mary's former lover showed was proof that he had lived with her. The police were shown searching Mary's house and examining the blood-stained curtains. Everything here was on show: the bodies, the locations, Frank's adultery, the details of Mary's sexual life. Mary's private life became public entertainment, and this focus on place and space highlights this function of crime in the Victorian press - it existed for the titillation and entertainment for the masses, rather than serving a didactic or moral purpose.

## **6 Reversal of Fortune**

Although Mary Piercey was romanticised and glamorised by a press competing with penny dreadfuls and romantic novelettes, this depiction started to change after her conviction. The guilty verdict came on 3 December 1890, after an hour's deliberation by the jury. Mary was convicted of two counts of murder. She protested her innocence to the judge, and after he put on his black cap and admitted that she must have played a part in the murders, he then went on to blame sexual desire for the crimes, stating that they were the result of 'persons giving way to prurient and indecent lust' and that Mary had 'little moral sense' in killing a woman 'whose only offence towards you was that she was married to a man for whom you had conceived your unholy attachment'.<sup>43</sup> The crowds present outside the court - of course,

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<sup>43</sup> *Globe*, 3 December 1890, p. 5.

crowds were mentioned again - listened intently for the verdict to make its way to them, but were reported to have been silent, failing to make any angry protest at the verdict.<sup>44</sup>

Petitions were duly submitted to the Home Secretary, with one claiming that she suffered from mental illness, and another that she had epilepsy (with regular fits 'impairing her moral consciousness'). There were also reports that she had previously attempted suicide on four different occasions (including by drowning, hanging, and taking poison). Many individuals, having followed the case in the papers, wrote to Mary's solicitor, Frederick Freke Palmer, to support his attempts to gain mercy for 'the unhappy convict'. The press coverage continued to be broadly supportive, noting Mary's kindness towards a female attendant at the Marylebone Police Court, and stressing her domesticity (she was appreciative of a baked custard pudding; when her mother visited her, they discussed 'family matters').<sup>45</sup>

But coverage was still changing. One newspaper reported that Freke Palmer had been accosted on his way to his office by an old woman, who shook her fist at him, shouting, "You scoundrel! If you get Mrs Piercey off, I'll break your neck!"<sup>46</sup> The petitions failed, and public support fell away. On the morning of her execution, 23 December 1890, the press again focused on the large crowds gathered outside Newgate Gaol. This time, though, they were vocal and demonstrating 'public antipathy almost unexampled since executions were performed privately.'<sup>47</sup> Mary was now described as an emotionless prisoner, with 'pinched features'. She was no longer described in terms of romance, for she was a convicted murderer facing the noose. Her death, quiet, and apparently 'instantaneous', ended her brief reign as star of the press's romantic love story.

## **Conclusion**

Today, as in 1890, we read of Mary's story from accounts mediated and manipulated by the nineteenth-century press. Judith Knelman dismisses a couple of attempts to understand her motivations by stating 'neither of these theories fits with what we know of her' - but what *do* we actually know of her?<sup>48</sup> What we know is derived from the letters that Mary carefully wrote to her lover (always with an eye to what might be found by others, so these were mediated by herself), from the dominant press narrative which sought to write a love story with Mary as its heroine, and from the illustrations that glamorised Mary and the crime she committed. In this case, the usual tropes of crime reporting – and, more specifically, the

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<sup>44</sup> *Globe*, 4 December 1890, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Western Times*, 12 December 1890, p. 8; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 15 December 1890, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 15 December 1890, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 27 December 1890, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Knelman, *Twisting in the Wind*, p. 112.

tropes of reporting about crimes committed by women – were turned on their head. Yvonne Jewkes has noted the tendency of the press to demonise the female offender, making her a monster, and this reflects the influence of gender within the criminal justice system of the time, in depicting violent women as ‘inhuman and utterly pathological’.<sup>49</sup> This was notably not done in the case of Mary Eleanor Piercey. However, Jewkes does note that both ideological climate and journalistic assumptions are ‘instrumental in creating public consensus’, thereby shaping the process by which some women are deemed to be ‘monsters in our midst’ and others not.<sup>50</sup>

The media’s attempt to create a romantic narrative around Mary Eleanor Piercey’s crime is problematic in so far as it differed from other mediated representations of Victorian murderesses. It is more usual to find these women, as Jewkes suggests, depicted in terms of their ‘otherness’, betraying the conventions of their gender and thus being shown to be ‘monsters’. As Anne-Marie Kilday notes, Kate Webster – convicted in 1879 of murdering her female employer – was depicted as a ‘virago and tyrant’, being described in terms of being coarse featured, and masculine.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, despite similarities between Webster and Piercey, in terms of the graphic violence of their cases and the domestic environment of the murders they committed two factors that, together with the relative rarity of women committing murders, the way in which the offenders were presented to the public was clearly very different. As Shani D’Cruze et al have noted, ‘public representations demonised Webster without any effective competing or sympathetic narratives emerging’, whereas the dominant narrative regarding Piercey was far more positive.<sup>52</sup> D’Cruze *et al* note that Kate Webster was also presented as unfeminine, contradicting the stereotype of Victorian femininity as ‘moral, passive, and not physically strong enough to kill’.<sup>53</sup> However, the similarly violent Mary Piercey was presented in a far more passive way.

Although Piercey was certainly a killer, the presence of romance novelettes and love letters served to help present her as both moral and passive. Throughout her relationship with Hogg, she appears to have been both loving and loyal, as well as forgiving of his relationship with Phoebe and the necessity of Frank marrying her once she became pregnant. Her love letters, as printed in the newspapers, showed her to be passive, waiting for Frank to be free

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<sup>49</sup> Ginger Frost, “‘She is but a Woman’: Kitty Byron and the English Edwardian Criminal Justice System”, *Gender and History*, 16:3 (2004), p. 538.

<sup>50</sup> Yvonne Jewkes, *Media and Crime*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: Sage, 2015), p. 130.

<sup>51</sup> Anne-Marie Kilday, ‘Constructing the cult of the criminal: Kate Webster – Victorian Murderess and Media Sensation’, in Anne-Marie Kilday and David Nash, eds. *Law, Crime and Deviance since 1700: Micro-Studies in the History of Crime* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp.133-134.

<sup>52</sup> Shani D’Cruze, Sandra L Walklate, Samantha Pegg, *Murder* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p.52.

<sup>53</sup> Shani D’Cruze *et al*, *Murder*, p.56.



to visit her, asking permission to come and see him, recognising the need for her to wait in the shadows and avoid suspicion. She therefore presented the press with a complex character – both strong and weak, moral and immoral, passive and active. Attempts were made to blame Frank for the murder – he was regarded as a weak man (thus contradicting Victorian stereotypes of masculinity), and suspicions were raised that he must have helped his lover get rid of the bodies of his wife and child, for how could a woman be strong enough to do so on her own? Yet Frank was never charged with an offence, and the statements of witnesses suggest it was indeed Mary who dumped the bodies of both Phoebe Hogg and her daughter without outside help. Therefore, the media faced a difficult task in representing Mary to readers, as she both met and confounded the conventional female stereotype. The romanticising of her case, and of her character, therefore focused on one element of the story - her identity as a lover, as a reader, and as a writer. This may have been a selected, mediated, representation of her, but it suited the sensationalism of the late Victorian press, and reflected the ‘sentimental impulses’ of the public.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Frost, “She is but a Woman”, p. 539.